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Pence praises 3M for mask-production efforts as MN braces for COVID-19

Peter Cox March 5, 2020 3:45 p.m.



Dr. Deborah Birx, left, the coronavirus response coordinator, Vice President Mike Pence and Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz meet at 3M company headquarters Thursday, March 5, 2020. Peter Cox | MPR News

Updated at 6:45 pm.

Vice President Mike Pence, who is heading the federal government's effort to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak, visited 3M's Minnesota headquarters Thursday and applauded the company's efforts to meet the demand for medical masks.

"We're going to be working with members of Congress to see if we can ensure sure that all of what 3M creates here, some 35 million masks a month, could be available to our health care providers," Pence told a group of 3M officials, including CEO Mike Roman.

3M spokesperson Jennifer Ehrlich said the number of respirators is "approximately the current monthly production level in the U.S." Certified respirators are masks that reduce exposure to airborne particles, including viruses.

Pence acknowledged that not enough COVID-19 testing kits had been made available so far, but said authorities were working on that.

"As more Americans take interest in this, or have concerns about this, we want to make sure they access to a coronavirus test as well and we've made real progress on that in the last several days," he said.

Gov. Tim Walz and other Minnesota officials also joined Pence in a roundtable at the Maplewood facility. The company began ramping up its production of the masks last January.

Pence's visit included a tour of 3M's Innovation Center, where he saw a demonstration of the technology used in manufacturing the masks.

Pence said some of the \$8.3 billion approved by Congress to fight the virus will go toward purchasing supplies like respirator masks.

"Including more than \$3 billion to procure medical supplies like masks and to make sure that those that are dealing with the coronavirus as well as those that are providing them health care have the protective equipment that they have," he said.

At the conclusion of his visit, Pence and Minnesota Health Commissioner Jan Malcolm touched elbows rather than shake hands.

Officials stressed that the masks are unnecessary for healthy people not employed in hospitals, nursing homes or clinics. They said the masks are primarily needed for those who are sick or work around patients.

Minnesota officials brace for first COVID-19 case

While there isn't a case confirmed as of Thursday, the Minnesota Department of Health is

requesting \$25 million in state funding to deal with the coronavirus outbreak.

Deputy health commissioner Margaret Kelly said she expects to be shifting staff to deal with the outbreak for some time.

"We will average about 100 people in redeployment for the length of the outbreak," she said, estimating the duration to be a year. "We currently have 100 people redeployed, we will have more as the outbreak progresses through the state."

Kelly said Minnesota may need \$40 million in masks and other protective gear alone. Health officials expected to run thousands of diagnostic tests, at about \$250 each, she said.

Cheryl Petersen-Kroeber, incident manager for the outbreak, said the state is anticipating purchase of millions of items like face masks.

The issues with trying to get enough [personal protection equipment] is going to be a huge challenge," she said, "and that is our huge push in trying to get people to be sensible with their purchasing and their private stockpiling."

Petersen-Kroeber said the state hopes to tap into a national stockpile and federal funding to help meet the demand.

The Health Department is boosting outreach efforts, too, and says it convened a conference call with more 800 people from the state's K-12 school systems. More than 100 people joined a conference with colleges and universities across the state. Another 700 people from nursing homes and long-term health care facilities heard from health officials this week.

MPR News reporter Tim Nelson contributed to this article.

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